THEIR EYES HAVE FOUR LEGS

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Seeing Eye Institution Provides Trained Dogs as Guides for the Blind

In the restful village of Whippany in Morris County, New Jersey, there is located a philanthropic institution of remarkable vision. Indeed it deals in vision, for without being unrealistically visionary, it has in effect restored vision to hundreds of sightless persons without benefit of surgery. It has accomplished and is accomplishing this objective by providing trained dogs to be the "eyes" for blind persons who have qualified for and have demonstrated that they can benefit from this kind of service.

Although located in New Jersey, The Seeing Eye is nationwide in its area of service. It has even gone somewhat beyond the confines of the nation, for it has practiced the policy of the good neighbor by extending its service in limited measure to blind persons in Canada. This extension of service has been necessarily limited because requests for its services from citizens in the United States are so numerous as to compel reservation of most of the facilities to meet the need at home. Like other institutions both public and private, The Seeing Eye experienced personnel problems during the war years and is now rebuilding its staff in order to extend its capacity for service. This objective is not susceptible to short time accomplishment because it takes four years to train an apprentice dog handler to maximum efficiency and effectiveness.

Because of the inherent drama of its purpose and accomplishment, and because of the affection most persons feel for an intelligent and handsome dog, the institution has appealed to the imagination of thousands of persons all over the country. While much has been written about it from time to time, questions addressed to the institution by interested persons are indicative of considerable misunderstanding as to how it functions.

The Seeing Eye was founded in January, 1929 by Mrs. Dorothy H. Eustis who had maintained a station in Switzerland for training dogs for border patrol duty, for finding missing persons, and for other services. After World War I, dogs had been trained as guides for blind veterans in Europe and Mrs. Eustis was interested in developing the area of canine usefulness. A blind young American named Morris S. Frank had gone to Switzerland in 1928 at the request of Mrs. Eustis. He returned with a trained dog as a guide. Travelling extensively through the eastern States, he provided a practical demonstration of the effectiveness of trained dog guides in this country and aroused widespread interest in the possibility. When he advised Mrs. Eustis that his experiences indicated that dog guides were effective in the United States, even in heavily congested traffic areas, she returned to the United States to found The Seeing Eye. Mr. Frank is now one of the vice presidents of the institution. It took some time to get the organization under way, to secure a number of dogs, and to secure trained personnel who could teach them. The first class of sightless persons equipped with trained dog guides left the institution in 1929.

Policies of the institution are determined by a board of trustees of fifteen members with broad geographical representation. Officers include Henry A. Colgate, of Morristown, N. J., president; W. H. Ebeling, of Dover, N. J., executive vice president; Perry E. Hall, of New York City, treasurer; and four vice presidents.

The Seeing Eye is financed by voluntary contributions through annual memberships. All donations of whatever amount are welcome. The institution does not participate in group campaigns for funds, and it does not use agents to solicit contributions.

Only Unit in U. S.

The institution at Whippany (the post office address is Morristown) is the only Seeing Eye unit in the United States, although there may be other organizations of similar character. Those in charge feel that the present facilities can be expanded to meet demands for some time to come and there is no thought, for the present, of establishing units elsewhere. The problems incident to expansion would not be simplified by the acquisition and construction of new units elsewhere. The slow development of a trained staff is the first requisite for expansion. Clearly the larger the staff the greater the number of dogs which can be trained in a year and therefore the greater the number of applicants which can be accommodated. The School can now house twenty-four clients at a time. Its present staff can train about 150 dogs a year. The Seeing Eye has trained more than 1,700 dogs in the eighteen years in which it has been in operation. The number of blind persons served is somewhat fewer because many have secured more than one dog in that period of years.

With a view to achieving maximum benefits from the funds at its disposal, The Seeing Eye selects its clients very carefully. Applicants must be of good moral character; except for their blindness, they must be in good physical condition in order to assure some measure of employability; they must have the intelligence and personality which will enable them to work with an intelligent dog; and they must manifest a sincere desire to get ahead and to be substantially self-supporting despite the handicap of blindness. The institution reinforces a client's self-reliance and self-respect by requiring that he pay for what he receives. The fee is not excessive and the client may have a long period of time in which to discharge the obligation, but it is part of the program of the institution to equip individuals who want to stand on their own feet.

Destined to be Someone's "Eyes"

There is one group which is excepted from the general requirements of payment for the service rendered. Under a policy initiated on December 8, 1941, the day after the attack upon Pearl Harbor, veterans who lost their sight in the service of their country are offered the services of the institution without cost provided they can meet the other general requirements. They are also given priority in admission over non-veterans. The Seeing Eye does not assume travelling expenses for any of its clients, but some veterans are able to make provision for this through the Veterans Administration.

The fee for providing a trained dog to a civilian client who comes to the institution for the first time is $150. This includes the training of the dog, the maintenance of the individual in the pleasant facilities of the institution for a month, and the dog itself, which leaves with his newly acquired master. A person who has had a Seeing Eye dog may return to the institution for a repeat service for a fee of fifty dollars.

Trainers Demonstrate Approved Guiding Position

Clients generally receive training in groups of eight and the institution can handle up to three classes at a time. Blind persons of either sex are admitted to the institution. Approximately twenty-five per cent of the graduates are women.

A three months period of intensive training is given each dog before it is assigned. If at the end of that time the animal has learned what the trainers consider essential, it is ready for assignment to a blind person. Both the blind person and the dog undergo a training period of a month at the institution. When the individual leaves for his home, his new "eyes" go with him.

The training of the dog involves teaching two fundamental traits which seem initially to be paradoxical. First it is taught obedience. Then it learns intelligent disobedience. If its master gives a command which will place the master in jeopardy, the dog disobeys and finds a safe solution. It is consistent in one broad trait, obedience to the best interest of the individual whom it serves. The dog learns only a few commands, the most important being "Right," "Left," and "Forward."

The blind client is also trained. He is taught how to "map" his community. Objects which can be felt—a broken curb, an iron fence, a change in the composition of the sidewalk—become his landmarks. The intelligence of both dog and man are utilized in getting about. In a strange city, the blind person does what anyone else does—he asks directions.

Choosing Dogs

The great majority of Seeing Eye dogs are German Shepherds, otherwise incorrectly known as German Police dogs. Selected animals of other breeds are sometimes used, notably Boxers and Labrador Retrievers. Several considerations are involved in selection of the animals. They must be intelligent and they must have courage. They must have an instinct for devotion to their master which overcomes any tendency to fight or gambol with other dogs on the street. They must be large enough so that their bodies can obstruct the master in case of danger—this rules out the terriers and smaller dogs. On the other hand, they must not be so large as to be physically unwieldy for their master, and this factor rules out St. Bernards and Great Danes. Long hair poses a cleanliness problem, especially in wet weather, which militates against selection of collies or other long-haired breeds.

The Seeing Eye buys most of its dogs, but it also has breeding kennels in which it produces a number of its own animals. Both methods of procurement have certain advantages. The average dog can not be trained until it is approximately fourteen months old. Prior to that it is a nonproductive liability since it must be fed and cared for. Breeding, however, gives assurance of stock from healthy and intelligent parentage. Both male and female dogs are used as guides.

The Seeing Eye maintains cont[illegible] with its "graduates." This enables it [illegible] check upon the effectiveness of its trai[illegible]ing methods; to learn whether the dogs are being well treated; and provides possibility of quick adjustment in case either a dog or his master dies. When the master dies, if the dog is young it may be placed with a new master. If it has passed its prime and the family of the deceased master wishes to keep it, their wishes are usually respected.

The average length of service of a trained Seeing Eye dog is eight years. Some have given consistent service for more than a dozen years. From years of observation, the trainers feel that the dog's responsibility has no injurious effect upon it. While they are zealous guardians, they are not normally more nervous or more belligerent than other dogs less carefully selected and less well trained. They are better treated than most other pets because of their value to their owners, and they apparently find great satisfaction in serving their handicapped masters.

The greatest difficulty encountered by blind persons and their guides comes from well meaning persons of poor judgment who try to take hold of either man or dog in efforts to help them.

Among the graduates of The Seeing Eye are teachers, lawyers, salesmen, musicians, piano tuners, office workers, operators of small businesses, clergymen, and social workers. In response to queries by the institution, all but a very small percentage said their canine guide had been a help rather than a hindrance in their work; and a similarly large percentage said they preferred a canine guide to a human guide, assuming the latter were available.

The institution would like to dispel an unfounded belief which has gained some credence. The Seeing Eye does not trade its valuable dogs for any amount of tin foil, box tops, cellophane wrappers, or other salvage. It provides its trained guides only to speci[illegible]ly selected blind persons who give ass[illegible] of being able to benefit substan[illegible] from the service.

Referrals are made by several agencies, but applications may be sent directly to The Seeing Eye, Inc., Morristown, N. J. Since it is a nationwide agency, it is able to make appropriate inquiry and follow-up in every State in the Union.

Workers in the building trades lose twenty to thirty per cent of their time in an average year because of seasonal layoffs.

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